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ABSTRACT

Teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL or L2) are encouraged to design writing prompts with great care and to work through them in detail, considering the wording, the mode of discourse, the rhetorical specifications, and the subject matter of each writing assignment. When confronted with a less clear, less precise prompt, L2 writers may fail to understand the cultural context of the prompt and "how" it determines the ways in which the prompt should be satisfied. Students often misunderstand the topic of the writing prompt. The difficulties L2 writers experience in reading academic writing prompts and understanding the culture in which these prompts exist affect their writing abilities. Those teachers of L2 writing do a disservice to their students when they accept writing that does not address the requirements of a prompt. Students must be given opportunities to become aware of the constraints of United States academic prose and the expectations of the academic audience if they are to succeed in the academic discourse community after leaving the writing classrooms. (Contains five references.) (CR)

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The Neglected Lesson:

Teaching L2 Writers to Decipher Writing Prompts

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In a TESL-L message, Anthea Tillyer of CUNY related the story of an L2 writer who, when asked to write on gun control, wrote instead on gum control, arguing that it was necessary because gum is bad for your teeth and people stick it under desks when finished (29 August 1995). After commenting that the essay was a "near-perfect (if boring)" five-paragraph essay, Tillyer asked "netters" if they would pass or fail the student for misunderstanding the topic. The responses she received, primarily from ESL instructors, were mostly in favor of grading the essay independently of the writing prompt. These instructors appear to mirror the TWE raters, all with ESL experience, in Conner and Carrell's study of how L2 writers interpret a TWE prompt (1993). The researchers found that the raters of the five writing responses studied "did not think it important for writers to address the specific requirements of the prompt" (p. 153).

At The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, all newly matriculating L2 students are required to sit for a writing test to determine their eligibility to register for English 1101, the mainstream freshman composition course. The students have fifty minutes to respond to a prompt which has been written by composition instructors and approved by the Director of Writing and Rhetoric. The compositions are then rated by a group of readers, often a combination of ESL-trained instructors and freshman composition instructors, to determine whether the L2 writers are strong enough in their writing skills to enter English 1101 or whether they would benefit from English 1100, an ESL support class. At the beginning of each semester, when reviewing the

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placement compositions of the students who were assigned to the ESL support course, we, the authors, recognize L2 writers who should have been assigned to mainstream freshman composition, students who could have responsibly handled the writing, but who were placed in the ESL support class because their test compositions did not address the prompt and, as a result, their writing was incoherent in terms of the prompt, e.g. citing possible tooth decay as an argument for gun control. From this experience we decided to begin looking at prompts to see how the misreading of the prompts by L2 writers affects the focus of their writing.

L2 Writers and Writing Prompts

ESL writing pedagogy encourages L2 writing teachers to design prompts with great care and to work through them in detail. We are advised to consider, in addition to our students' prior knowledge, "the wording, the mode of discourse, the rhetorical specifications, and the subject matter" of each writing assignment (Reid, 1993, p. 196). Although these carefully crafted and taught prompts are necessary for beginning L2 writers, advanced students may become too dependent on them. As a result, when confronted with a less clear, less precise prompt written for the academic classroom, L2 writers may fail to understand the cultural context of the prompt and how it determines the ways in which the prompt should be satisfied.

As L2 writing instructors, we are aware that our students are vulnerable to giving inadequate, if not incorrect, responses to academic writing prompts, but often we argue that students do so because the prompts are neither clear nor culturally sensitive or that instructors need to improve their skills at writing prompts. It could be, however, that when we target the prompts and the writers of the prompts as the problem, we are neglecting our responsibility to teach L2 students basic classroom

literacy--the ability to read not only the specific requirements of a prompt, but also the culture of the classroom, which often dictates the audience and purpose for a writing response.

We found that poor reading of writing prompts occurs at different levels of writing ability and in varied academic situations. In an intensive L2 writing class at a community college, students were given fifty minutes to respond to the following prompt:

> When you came to the U.S., you made plans to leave your country, travel to the U.S., and find a place to live in the U.S. Write an essay that describes the steps that you followed in this process.

From the many different responses of the L2 writers in the class, it is clear that the prompt was ambiguous for them in its request for a description of steps followed in three parts of a process--plans to leave the country, plans to travel, and plans to find a place to live in the U.S. Only six of the seventeen students addressed all three parts, five students addressed one or two parts, two discussed why they decided to come to the U.S., three described their difficulties adjusting to life in the U.S., and one discussed her family's reluctance to let her come to study in the U.S.

In order to qualify for freshman English, newly admitted L2 students had fifty minutes to satisfy the following prompt:

> Most everyone has both victories (successes) and failures in life. Sometimes a person's victory or failure has a significant effect on the lives of others. Choose a person that you have knowledge of in our world, in history, or someone you know personally, who has had

> such an effect on your life and/or others' lives, and write about that person's victory or failure.

Once more, the variety of responses showed the inability of the L2 writers to understand what was required. One student described the life of Bob Marley and his drug use, concluding with the words to one of his songs, "Everything is gonna be all right...." Another wrote how the music of the Beatles made her want to learn English. Three papers discussed Gorbachev's contributions to the free world, and one student, after describing the good qualities of the "principal" of his university, wrote, "Dear teacher, I'm sorry but I had no idea for this writing, so I wrote about him in spite of not knowing well." Although the last directive of the prompt only asks the students to write about a person's victory or failure, an L1 student, understanding the culture of the classroom, would have been aware of the implied request to demonstrate, additionally, how that person affected the writer's life or the lives of others.

The following prompt was asked of all freshman requesting admission to the College of Architecture:

> Education places a premium on what may best be termed "problem solving." For example: given a problem to solve, a project to organize, a picture to paint, information to be arranged and communicated to others, what is your method, process, or technique? How do you achieve the simple outcome you desire? Do you begin by first developing an understanding of the problem by immersing yourself in it and unraveling it as you work through it? Or do you carefully plan your attack, creating strategies to achieve an outcome you desire?

This prompt asks for information about the strategies that a student uses in solving a problem, but none of the L2 writers we studied focused on this. Instead, they concentrated on the first sentence, which gives the context for the prompt, and discussed the advantages of education, education as a necessity in problem solving, education as a provider of high culture and high quality in personal living, and even the advantages of having a grandparent live with the family. Awareness of the conventions used in writing prompts or assignments requires knowledge of classroom culture; L1 students would have known to scan the prompt until they came to a directive or a request, in this case, "...what is your method, process, or technique? How do you achieve...?"

Discussion

The difficulties L2 writers experience in reading academic writing prompts and understanding the culture in which these prompts exist affect their writing abilities. As L2 writing teachers, we are left with questions about how to help our students decipher their writing assignments so that they can succeed in their composition classes and in their broader academic classes

ESL reading instructors know the importance of providing context for reading comprehension, but what is the context for a writing prompt, especially one given out of the blue for, say, a TWE composition or a freshman English diagnostic writing? The context, we are told, is the culture, specifically the culture of school. Nelson, quoting Dyson, argues that student writers need to know "how to do school" (1995, p. 413). Citing the works of Como, Flower, and others, Nelson shows the necessity of students' being able to read the culture of the classroom as text and understanding how this information determines the ways in which an assignment can be, or must be, satisfied

(p. 412). Strasma (1993) and Shih (1992) underscore the importance of teaching critical reading strategies and task analysis strategies, such as understanding directions, expectations, and evaluation criteria, for helping students respond to writing prompts.

Conclusion

Those of us who teach L2 writing do a disservice to our students when we accept writing that does not address the requirements of a prompt. More importantly, however, we may be shortchanging, perhaps even cheating, our students when we neglect to teach them how to navigate writing prompts by themselves. As Reid (1993, p. 62) reminds us, we must give our students "opportunities to become aware of the constraints of U.S. academic prose and the expectations of the U.S. academic audience" if they are to succeed in the academic discourse community after leaving our writing classrooms.

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